

WHY WE USE LITURGY IN WORSHIP



INTRODUCTION

Visitors to Coram Deo's worship gathering will immediately recognize the use of liturgy in our worship. We follow a definite pattern every week. We employ scripted confessions, creeds, prayers, and professions of faith to add structure to our worship. The question is: why?

This short essay seeks to answer that question for those new to this type of worship and also for those called to lead it.

SECTION ONE: FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF LITURGY

1. LITURGY IS BIBLICAL

The first and most important reason we use liturgy in our worship is because liturgy is biblical.

In the Old Testament¹, worship followed a sequence of three offerings. The sin offering was given first, symbolically *cleansing* the people from sin. Next came the burnt offering, which was burned up entirely to signify the total *dedication* of the worshippers to God. Finally, a fellowship or peace offering was offered. Having been *cleansed* from sin and *consecrated* to God, the worshipper could now enjoy *communion* and friendship with God.

With the coming of Jesus, most of the Old Testament worship rituals – altars and animal sacrifices and burnt offerings – have been abrogated. But the basic *pattern* of approach to God – cleansing, consecration, and communion – remains the same. Consider how each of these elements is reiterated in the New Testament:

- Covenant: We are in covenant with God, just like our forefathers were. *But now [Jesus] has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. (Hebrews 8:6)*
- Cleansing/Confession: God still expects us to confess sin before approaching him in worship. *If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:6-9)*
- Communion: Experiential communion with God – the renewing, refreshing experience of his presence and power – is still the ideal for gathered worship. *And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31)*

Since Christ has come, the external practices of worship have changed. But the biblical *pattern* of approach to God has not. God calls his people together to cleanse us of our sins, remind us of our covenant obligations, renew our fellowship with him, and send us back into his world as his representatives. And this order matters.

As a helpful analogy, think of a wedding. Every Christian wedding ceremony follows a particular order. The bride is escorted down the aisle by her father; she is given away to the groom; solemn vows are repeated; rings are given; the union is sealed with a kiss; and the minister pronounces the couple to be husband and wife. This order is intuitively obvious to all who are present – it’s just “the way it should be.” But why? Because a wedding is a covenant ceremony. And such ceremonies proceed according to a certain form, or ritual. There’s a “right order” to them. The same is true for a courtroom proceeding, a citizenship oath, or a home mortgage loan. And for a Christian worship service.

As Christians, we are *God’s new covenant people*. Our relationship with God is *a covenant relationship*. And so we gather weekly to renew that covenant according to the pattern God gives us in Scripture.

2. LITURGY IS HISTORICAL

In historic Christianity, liturgy was a given. Christian worship was scripted according to a definite form. If you’ve ever been to a traditional Lutheran or Anglican worship service or even a Catholic mass, you’ve seen how liturgy works. People speak, stand, sit, kneel, and pray at specified times, following a particular structure or pattern.

In recent centuries, as liberal theology drained away the historic orthodox convictions of traditional churches, the liturgy became little more than a vacuous structure, devoid of any devotion to Christ or commitment to his mission. In response, the evangelical movement arose. In its passion to avoid the “deadness” of traditional church liturgies, evangelicalism went rabidly anti-liturgical, opting instead for a free-form sort of worship service. Evangelicals still prayed, preached, and sang in their worship gatherings, but without an intentional pattern. Corporate confession of sin, the recitation of creeds, spoken prayers, and the regular practice of the Lord’s Supper were mostly neglected. Better to “let the Spirit lead” than to succumb to a dead orthodoxy.

But the net result of this change has been less than desirable. Evangelicalism has produced a generation of Christians who have a vague sense that corporate worship is important, but have no idea why, or what (if any) form it should take, or whether there is even a biblical pattern for how the church should approach its Lord. They also lack a sense of history. They have little regard for the continuity of “the faith once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 1:3) throughout generations and centuries.

If you study church history, you’ll notice that every generation held the same few elements as “properly basic” for Christian discipleship:

the Ten Commandments. The Lord's Prayer. The Apostles' Creed. The Great Commission. The Shema. Where did our forefathers learn these things? In the liturgy! Ask yourself: do you know all ten of the Commandments? Can you recite the Lord's Prayer from memory? Is the Apostles' Creed second nature to you? If not, it's probably because you grew up in a church that didn't practice liturgy. In fact, chances are that your non-literate Christian ancestors knew the Bible better than you do – simply because of the liturgical rhythms they were immersed in. Benedictine monks sing through the entire book of Psalms not once, but three times each year. After doing that for forty years, don't you think you'd have most of them memorized?

Because we want to embrace our rich connection with the people of God throughout history, we use liturgy in our worship gatherings.

3. LITURGY IS FORMATIVE

Think about the rhymes, songs, and cadences you learned as a young child: the Alphabet song, "Happy Birthday," the Pledge of Allegiance. Maybe you can remember the theme music to your favorite childhood cartoon or the lines you had to memorize for your first school play. Why are these things so ingrained in your memory? Because they had a formative effect on you. They shaped you. They created "grooves" in your soul and in your memory that are easily recalled to this day.

James K.A. Smith refers to these shaping experiences – and others like them – as "secular liturgies." Our cultural institutions – education, media, corporations, government – have a *liturgical* motive. They want to *shape* us. They want to inculcate into us a certain "vision of the good life." They want to make us into a certain kind of people – people who buy their products or are loyal to their cause or embrace their ideals.

The liturgy of Christian worship is a subversive counter-measure against the shaping influence of culture. By using liturgy in worship, we are seeking to reform or re-shape people according to the gospel. Rather than being defined by the world, we want them to take on the values of the kingdom of God. This formation takes place on a number of levels:

- *Theological Formation.* Theological convictions are formed not just through teaching and study, but through singing, confession, creeds, and catechisms. A church's theology can be "felt" in how it prays and how it sings and how it treats the Lord's Supper. As a church committed to historic Reformed theology, we want the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of man to be consistently portrayed in our rhythms. We want the redemptive drama of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation to be felt and experienced regularly in every aspect of our worship.
- *Spiritual Formation.* What we do in worship shapes the way we approach God in private. By reading Scripture aloud each week, by confessing our sin each week, by hearing the promises of the gospel spoken each week, by celebrating Jesus' death and resurrection in communion each week, we are forming our souls in a certain "cadence" or rhythm of worship. We

are building habits that shape our desires and inclinations in unseen ways. Smith notes: “We don’t wake up each day thinking about a vision of the good life and then consciously, reflectively make discrete decisions about what we’ll do today... Instead... our desire for the kingdom is inscribed in our dispositions and habits and functions quite apart from our conscious reflection.”¹ Children, especially, are formed by the familiarity and regularity of liturgy: “Christian worship that is full-bodied reaches, touches, and transforms even those who cannot grasp theological abstractions.”²

- *Gospel Formation.* If it’s true that we never outgrow the gospel (Col. 1:6, Romans 1:16), then we need our hearts to be shaped more and more by the reality of that good news. In Christian worship we are celebrating the gospel story. We are reminding ourselves of the truth of who we are and whose we are. We are “learning the language” of the gospel – becoming fluent in speaking it to ourselves and to others. A gospel-infused liturgy shapes us more fully into a gospel-centered people.

We use liturgy at *Coram Deo* because of the way it forms us theologically, spiritually, and redemptively.

4. LITURGY IS MISSIONAL

Anyone who has ever felt distant or “lost” at a Catholic funeral or an Anglican Eucharist celebration will likely question this point. Isn’t liturgy a profound obstacle to mission? Doesn’t it naturally exclude anyone who’s not an “insider” – who doesn’t already know the language and the expectations?

By no means! The problem is not in the liturgy itself, but in the way it’s conducted. Poor leadership can make even the richest liturgy feel stale, dry, detached, and inhospitable. But good, gospel-shaped leaders will use liturgy to extend a welcoming, hospitable arm to strangers and sojourners.

The word *liturgy* comes from a Greek term that means “a public service.” Liturgy is designed to make Christian worship *public* – that is, accessible to outsiders! When it is properly explained and warmly engaged, liturgy creates an accessible “flow” that beckons outsiders in. Like a table of contents or a map, it makes unfamiliar territory familiar.

In our city, liturgy is also good contextualization. Over fifty percent of Omaha residents grew up Lutheran or Catholic. Liturgy is what they know and expect. A liturgical worship service – but one infused with gospel warmth and joy – will seem both welcoming and challenging at the same time.

SECTION TWO: THE SHAPE OF LITURGY

Theologian Simon Chan notes that throughout the history of the church, the basic shape of Christian liturgy has been relatively consistent. “Word and sacrament are set within the act of gathering and the act of returning, thus giving rise to a fourfold structure.”¹ Chan goes on to frame out the basic elements of the church’s worship liturgy:

Entrance

- *Greeting/Call to Worship*: God is, in a sense, the host, and we are being welcomed into his presence. Sometimes a call to worship consisting of an appropriate sentence from Scripture is added to remind the congregation why they are gathered together.
- *Adoration*: This is an act of proclaiming who God is and also responding to his calling us together. The most common form of adoration is the hymn of praise.
- *Confession*. Confession is a poignant reminder that we have not yet arrived. Liturgical confession must acknowledge both corporate and personal sins, both sins against God and sins against humanity. In the liturgy, each person is no longer an individual but a member of the body of Christ, and personal confession is needed as members of the body of Christ.
- *Absolution*. Absolution could be understood as a condensation of the gospel... the words of absolution convey the good news of God’s forgiveness of sinful creatures. It is necessary that the giving of the word of forgiveness follow from the confession if the relationship is to be reestablished.

The Proclamation of the Word

- *Reading of Scripture*. In reading the Bible we are not engaged in mere historical recollection. We are saying that God is speaking to us today; it is the Living Word that addresses us in our present condition.
- *Sermon*. Preaching is Spirit-inspired speech. In preaching, the preacher is bearing witness to the truth he proclaims and staking his life on it. It builds a bridge between the ‘there and then’ of the salvation event in Jesus and the ‘here and now’ of God’s continuing saving activity by the Spirit.
- *Prayer*. The prayer of general intercession, as it is sometimes called, focuses on matters that are basic to the life of the church in the world. Four areas of concern are usually covered: the needs of the church, civil authorities and the salvation of the world, those burdened by any kind of difficulty, and the local community. It is the prayer of the entire church but is usually led by one person, with the congregation making response.
- *Sign of Reconciliation and Peace*. The exchange of peace serves as a reminder that the children of God must be reconciled to one another before they can partake of the Supper.

Holy Communion

- The Eucharist proclaims in word and sign the death, resurrection, and return of the Lord and thereby makes the mystery of the gospel an ever-present reality.

Dismissal

- *Benediction.* The benediction spoken at the end of the service is the final word to the people of God before they return to the world to serve. In the blessing, however, we are not using a formula that mechanically induces a blessing. We are proclaiming the action of the Triune God. The gift can only be received by faith.
- *Sending Forth.* The liturgical journey begins with Christians' leaving the world and ends with a return to it. We ascend the Mount of Transfiguration so that we may descend to face the painful reality of this world. True worship heightens rather than resolves this tension.

SECTION THREE: THE WEEKLY LITURGY AT CORAM DEO

Coram Deo's weekly worship gathering follows this historic liturgical structure, contextualizing it for an urban, missional, post-Christian setting. A pastor or worship leader guides the congregation through the liturgy in a warm, hospitable fashion, serving as a sort of "tour guide" to make unfamiliar territory familiar. Following Chan's outline, our weekly worship gathering progresses as follows:

Entrance

- *Greeting/Call to Worship:* The Liturgy Leader welcomes the congregation, reiterates the vision for a gospel-centered missional church, and sets the stage for worship by reading an appropriate passage of Scripture.
- *Adoration:* The first set of worship songs are carefully chosen to reinforce God's holy character, his mighty acts, and his steadfast love, leading the people into a sense of worship and adoration toward God.
- *Confession.* The worship leader guides the congregation through a spoken confession.
- *Absolution.* One of the worship leaders speaks a word of absolution and pardon over the people, using a specific text of Scripture to highlight the promises of the gospel.

The Proclamation of the Word

- *Profession of Faith.* After a season of musical worship, the Liturgy Leader guides the congregation in a spoken profession of faith, usually utilizing a historic creed. In this way we profess our unity with the church throughout history and reinforce the core doctrines of the Christian faith.
- *Prayer.* The Liturgy Leader leads the entire church in prayer, highlighting particular needs within the church, the city, and the world.

- *Reading of Scripture.* Almost every week, the text on which the sermon is based is read aloud, creating space for the congregation to hear and reflect.
- *Sermon.* Coram Deo's pastors strive to excel in preaching gospel-centered, Christ-focused, expository sermons. We see the pulpit not merely as a place for biblical instruction, but as the driving force for leading the church in mission, shaping the church in the gospel, and showing the relevance of the gospel to non-Christians.

Holy Communion

- Communion is observed every week as the culmination of our worship. In how we introduce the sacrament, fence the table, and dispense the elements, we seek to comfort believers with the finished work of Christ and beckon unbelievers to respond in repentance and faith toward Jesus.

Dismissal

- *Benediction/Sending Forth.* These two elements are usually combined into one as the preaching pastor speaks God's blessing over his people and sends them back into the world to live *coram deo* – before his face. Having entered God's presence and renewed our covenant with Him, we are now sent out to advance his kingdom and live for his glory.

After years of practicing this pattern, we can testify to its formative effect among our congregation, its missional efficacy in our city-context, and its help in strengthening gospel fluency within our church community.

CONCLUSION

This essay has been written to help those new to Coram Deo understand our structure of worship; to help those leading worship at Coram Deo grow in their understanding of liturgy and their proficiency in leading it; and to serve people outside of Coram Deo who are seeking to better understand liturgical worship. For those desiring a more scholarly and theologically robust discussion of these topics, we recommend the following books:

- *Unceasing Worship* by Harold Best (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2003).
- "Reformed Worship in the Global City" by Timothy J. Keller, in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 193-249.
- *Liturgical Theology* by Simon Chan (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2006).
- *Desiring the Kingdom* by James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).
- *Rhythms of Grace* by Mike Cospers (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Absolution - forgiveness and cleansing from sin

Catechism - summary of principles/beliefs used for instruction

Consecrate - dedicating to God; making holy

Creeeds - formal statement of beliefs

Evangelical - committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the necessity of personal faith and repentance

Intercession - the act of intervening on behalf of another

Liberal Theology - a theological viewpoint that denies the authority of scripture

Reformed Theology - a theological viewpoint that stresses the sovereignty of God and the glory of Jesus Christ

ENDNOTES

¹See Leviticus 9 for the clearest and most concise description of this pattern.

²James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 56.

³Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 136.

⁴Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 129. The rest of this section is summarized from pages 130-146 of this same work.